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Personal Conflict at the Heart of 'Stein'

BY PHILIP BRANDES

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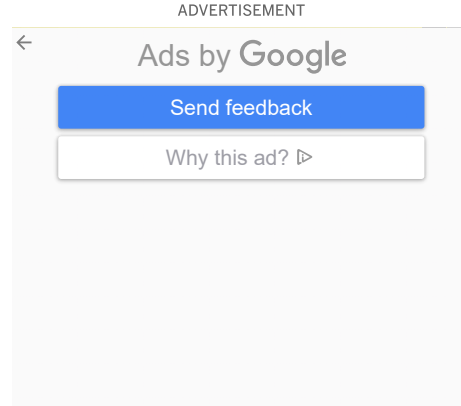


Jewish intellectual, alienated neurotic, passionate humanist, Carmelite nun, Auschwitz martyr and now saint--the tragic figure of Edith Stein embodies many 20th century complexities. The controversy surrounding her has only deepened in the time since the Actors Co-op opened its doors in 1993 with Arthur Giron's fictional biography, "Edith Stein," and in the wake of her recent canonization, the religiously oriented company's revival proves a timely resurrection.

Looking past arguments about the theological and political ramifications of Stein's conversion to Catholicism, Giron's play zeros in on the personal conflicts that divided her. In the title role, Zena Dell Schroeder convincingly depicts a restless, troubled spirit unable to find her place in the world. Studies in psychology and philosophy earn her academic distinction but not the fulfillment she ultimately seeks in Christ, to the dismay of her mother (Helen Siff), who exclaims, "If it's a cross you want--get married!"

The humorous moments are pretty scarce in Mark Henderson's serious and well-crafted staging, aided by a particularly evocative original score by Darrin Newhardt. Yet the portrait isn't completely reverential--Schroeder shades Edith with enough arrogance and self-pity to keep her human side in view. Unfortunately, there's a stylized formality to the flashbacks about her early years that keeps our emotions at a distance. The running debate between a latter-day Jewish activist (Barry Cutler) and the Prioress (JoAnn Campanella) of Stein's convent--each trying to position Edith's memory for their "side"--never strikes as urgent a note as her personal crises. Some less-than-credible German accents among the cast are distracting at times.

The piece hits its full dramatic stride in the second half, with a riveting extended dialogue between Edith (now a Carmelite nun) and a Nazi officer (Pepper Sweeney) who becomes obsessed with conquering her spirit. Part interrogation, part creepy courtship, their encounters become a spiritual battleground of mythic dimensions.



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* "Edith Stein," Crossley Theatre, 1760 N. Gower St., Hollywood. Thursdays-Saturdays, 8 p.m.; Sundays, 2:30 p.m. Ends Dec. 20. \$17. (213) 462-8460. Running time: 2 hours, 30 minutes.

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